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# **RELIGION, SPIRITUALITY & MENTAL HEALTH: CURRENT CONTROVERSIES AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS**

Author 1

Author 2

Author 3

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Religion and Mental Health

Simon Dein

Research Dept Mental Health Sciences

University College London

Charles Bell House

67-73 Riding House St

W1W 7EJ

s.dein @ucl.ac.uk

**RELIGION, SPIRITUALITY & MENTAL HEALTH: CURRENT  
CONTROVERSIES AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS**

**Simon Dein FRCPsych PhD <sup>1</sup>**

**Christopher Cook FRCPsych PhD <sup>2</sup>**

**Harold Koenig , MD, MHSc.<sup>3</sup>**

## **Abstract**

Although studies examining religion, spirituality and mental health generally indicate positive associations, there is need for more sophisticated methodology, greater discrimination between different cultures and traditions, more focus on the situated experiences of individuals belonging to particular traditions, and in particular, a greater integration of the theological contributions to this area. We suggest priorities for future research based on these considerations.

## **Introduction**

Research on the relationships between religiousness, spirituality and mental health has burgeoned in the past twenty years. Overall a preponderance of studies indicates that religious individuals fare better than their secular counterparts in terms of selected psychological disorders (Hackney et al, 2003; Koenig et al, 2011 (In Press); Koenig et al, 2001).

Recent data suggest that religion/spirituality are important coping strategies in those suffering with schizophrenia (Mohr et al, 2011) and for patients with helpful religion, the importance of spirituality was predictive of fewer negative symptoms, better clinical global impression, social functioning and quality of life (Mohr et al, 2006; Siddle et al, 2002). In relation to depression, surveys in non-clinical general population and community samples reveal fairly consistent inverse relationships between global indices of religion (e.g., frequency of church attendance and self-rated religiousness) and depressive disorders (Smith et al, 2003). It appears that religiosity exerts both a main effect on depressive symptoms and also a buffering effect in which religious factors become more salient as life stresses increase. Additionally religion has been reported in several studies to predict a faster remission from depression in those with this disorder (Koenig, 2007). In contrast, the relationships between anxiety and religious involvement appear to be complex with some studies reporting less anxiety

among the more religious, some demonstrating increased anxiety, and others finding no relationship (Shreve-Neiger et al, 2004).

Rates of drug and alcohol abuse have been found to be significantly lower in those who are religious compared to their non-religious counterparts (The National Center on Addiction and Substance Abuse at Columbia University, 2001). Substance abuse is the largest and most decisive literature on religion and mental health, has longitudinal data, and may underlie a lot of the other findings so it should be further explored.

Another area which has been extensively covered, mainly in the sociology literature, is the relationship between religion, spirituality and teenage delinquency. A systematic review of the topic revealed that the literature is not disparate or contradictory, as previous studies have suggested. Religious measures are generally inversely related to deviance, and this is especially true among the most rigorous studies (Jackson et al, 2008; Johnson et al, 2000). These authors suggest that the findings indicate that future research on delinquency may gain explanatory power by incorporating religious variables in relevant theoretical models.

It has been asserted, however, that the claims for positive associations between religion and health have been grossly exaggerated (Sloan, 2006; Sloan et al, 1999). This paper examines the methodological problems in this field and

particularly argues for the need for researchers to incorporate insights into the nature of spirituality and religion derived from anthropology, theology and religious studies.

### **Methodological Issues**

Researchers deploy diverse definitions and scales of religion and spirituality, upon which the results of empirical studies are highly dependent, but the content of chosen scales does not always accurately reflect the chosen definitions (Cook, 2004). Religiosity and spirituality are multi dimensional constructs (Salsman et al, 2005) and it is necessary to specify exactly which dimensions are assessed in any given study and to have theoretical justification for doing so.

Definitions of non-religiousness are also problematic. Many studies include samples of individuals classified as “low spirituality” or “religion: none” with little consideration given to the heterogeneity of these groups (Hwang et al, 2009). Atheism, a belief that there is no God, is arguably more akin to religious belief than non-belief. In one study, strong atheists were no more likely to be depressed than strong believers and were less depressed than weak believers or wavering agnostics (Riley et al, 2005). It may be the strength of belief rather than the type of belief that positively impacts upon mental health. The small number of self-identified atheists in most populations makes inclusion in research studies in high enough numbers for adequate power quite difficult, and it is even more

difficult to control for characteristics (e.g., high level of education, high socio-economic status) which relate positively to mental health.

True agnosticism, a philosophical commitment to the impossibility of knowing whether there is a God, is much less common than uncertainty about what is believed, or failure to reflect on what one does believe. Distinctions are rarely made between atheists/agnostics who self identify as spiritual and those who eschew any such label.

Some studies do not distinguish between spirituality and religion. While traditional measures of “religiosity” tend to be more objective, based on observable behaviours such as church attendance or frequency of prayer, it is almost impossible to imagine any way of measuring spirituality that is uninfluenced either by religious belief and practice on the one hand, or by psychological variables on the other. When spirituality is measured using indicators of good psychological or social wellbeing, then it cannot meaningfully be said to predict such wellbeing. Either a more robust and discriminative methodology for measuring spirituality is needed, or else research should focus on religious belief, practice, or experience.

Studies are often cross-sectional in design giving no indication about causality.

Many studies have looked at religion and mental health using advanced



statistical modeling although few have been prospective. There are some exceptions. Hill et al (2006) used growth curve modelling to examine the prospective relationship between religious involvement and cognitive functioning among older Mexican Americans. Respondents who attended church monthly, weekly, and more than weekly tended to exhibit slower rates of cognitive decline than those who did not attend church. In a ten year prospective study of offspring of depressed and non – depressed patients, Miller et al (2012) found that a high self-report rating of religion or spirituality may have a protective effect against recurrence of depression, particularly in adults with a history of parental depression.

Religious factors may function in different ways at different times through the lifespan. Inverse relationships have been found between religiosity and symptoms of depression in children as well as anxiety and psychotic symptoms (Miller et al, 1997). In adolescence religious involvement exerts salutary effects on subjective well being and religious adolescents suffer from fewer depressive or anxiety symptoms (Regnerus et al, 2003). Few studies, however, follow children through adolescence and into adulthood and later life to see what the long-term effects of religious beliefs, practice, and training have on mental health across the lifespan.

One retrospective study has examined how elderly people viewed religious changes over their lifecourse. Qualitative interviews with adults age 65 years

and over identified four different trajectories of religiosity across the life course: stable, increasing, decreasing and curvilinear (Ingersoll-Dayton et al, 2002). Consistent with previous studies using retrospective data, the narratives of older participants emphasized increasing religiosity over time. However, some stories included evidence of decreasing religiosity particularly with respect to organizational participation. Future research should be directed at identifying correlations between such trajectories and mental health.

Although some authors postulate that religious factors directly influence the relationships between religion and mental health (Jones, 2004), others assert that religious variables can be reduced to other factors that previously have been found to influence mental health more generally: social support; healthy lifestyles; positive emotions; positive appraisals and effective coping (George et al, 2002). Few studies have incorporated a methodology capable of distinguishing between such direct or indirect causal mechanisms. **Most of the studies have not been designed from the start to examine religion-health relationships, but have depended on existing datasets that were acquired for some other purpose and seldom have sophisticated measures of** religious involvement; the research is based on the one or two items someone managed to slip into a larger study, not from specific studies designed for this topic.

Some scholars are more skeptical about religious influences altogether, asserting rather that they may be the product of selection effects and social desirability bias in surveys (Regnerus et al, 2005). This may be particularly important in relation to studies of religion and drug/alcohol abuse: **that people with substance abuse problems may be reluctant to participate in religious activity (due to guilt), may be more likely to minimize or deny drug/alcohol abuse, and/or may be excluded from religious activity.** People tend to engage in more or less religious behavior for a variety of reasons, including some that have nothing to do with acceptance of particular (orthodox) religious beliefs. Researchers and authors must take care not to assume that the benefits of religion are related to belief (or, at least, not to traditional or orthodox belief) and need to consider the other reasons why people engage in religious behavior (eg social support, conformity, tradition, etc). Certain personality types such as the 'risk averse' may be more likely to be religious and also to lead more healthy lifestyles hence confounding the relationship between religion and health (Iannaccone, 1995)

## **Religion and Culture**

Anthropology has a longstanding interest in religion yet few anthropologists have contributed to the literature on religion and mental health. It is a comparative discipline which offers a detailed database of in-depth studies of a wide range of communities that can be compared and contrasted to facilitate understanding of which patterns of behaviour are universal and which patterns are unique and

shaped by local contexts. Ethnographic research provides detailed contextual accounts of religious experiences and practices, giving a voice to those whom we study, and allows us to see the world from an emic perspective (from the native's point of view) (Ware et al, 1999). We cannot assume that notions of mental health and illness are similar across cultural groups (Kleinman et al, 2006). In traditional cultures that emphasize collectivism rather than individualism, selfhood and the spirit world are closely interlinked, with mental health and spiritual health closely reflecting each other. Terms such as God, religion, spirituality and belief are differentially understood cross-culturally thus signalling the need for detailed ethnographic research and cross cultural validation of measurement scales.

Culture and religion are inextricably woven together (Geertz, 1973). Specific teachings and observances may be understood differently in diverse cultural contexts and the salience of various dimensions of religion (ideological, intellectual, social, experiential and ritualistic) may vary across cultural groups. Numerous studies have demonstrated the influence of these and related constructs on coping with stress, formation of social relationships, occupational attitudes, conflict, life satisfaction, and development of values (Tarakeshwar et al, 2003). Many researchers have drawn attention to the cultural diversity of religious/spiritual coping, appealing for qualitative, multi faith, cross cultural designs which can tease out the relative contributions of culture and religion. To date few researchers have heeded this appeal.

Despite growing ethnic diversity in North America and Europe, researchers continue to deploy cross-sectional methodologies limited to single faith samples. There are some exceptions. One study of perspectives on death in Muslim communities in two different countries (Egypt and Bali) found that despite their common religion, members of the two cultures dealt very differently with death (Wikan, 1988).

Furthermore there is emerging evidence that relationships between religious attendance and mental health may be moderated by ethnicity. In one study of a representative sample of US adults, there were racial/ethnic differences with Hispanics and African Americans showing a stronger relationship between attendance and distress than non-Hispanic whites (Tabak et al, 2009). Thus future studies on religion and mental health should take account of culture and ethnicity as moderating factors.

Two contemporary areas of anthropological interest might inform the religion and mental health agenda. First there is a prominent focus in the anthropology of religion on religious experience, its phenomenology and its relationships to mental wellbeing that tie together issues of agency, gender, embodiment and power. Compared to belief and attendance, religious experience has been neglected in the scholarly literature (Dein, 2010). In many cultures religious rituals and prayer are prevalent strategies for dealing with adversity, but we know

little about their mental health consequences. Phenomenological differences between experiences in prayer and psychopathological states are not always clear (Dein et al, 2007). There may be significant phenomenological overlaps between experiences labelled as psychotic and those labelled as religious (Brett, 2002). Although much of the ethnographic work on religious experience has focused on 'spirit possession' in non-western cultures (Boddy, 1994), there is some work examining Charismatic Christian healing in the USA (Csordas, 1994) and hearing God's voice among Pentecostal Christians in the UK (Dein and Littlewood 2007).

Second, there is now a wealth of anthropological data examining the role of 'religious' healing of diverse mental and physical disorders. Although predominantly focused on 'traditional' societies, such studies illuminate the ways in which religious factors might facilitate healing in 'modern' societies (Watts, 2011).

Finally we cannot assume that findings from one religion can be extrapolated onto all religions. Although there has been some recent progress in moving beyond the typical focus on Christianity to examine Judaism, Buddhism, Hinduism and Islam, more attention is needed to the complex interactions of religion, spirituality and mental health in different cultures and faith traditions (Milstein et al, 2010).

## **Theology and Religious Studies**

Theology and religious studies address a broad range of inquiry into the historic and contemporary nature of belief and its impact on ethical norms and behaviour, values, meaning and purpose in life, self understanding, and the grounds for human hope or despair, yet little of this appears to be taken into account in the design and implementation of scientific research.

Perhaps most concerning for scientific research on spirituality and health, is the largely unexamined idea that generic understandings of spirituality – devoid of history, specificity, or acknowledged tradition – necessarily have anything at all to do with the actual beliefs, practices and experiences of “lived” spirituality and religion situated in the diverse cultural and geographical contexts of real people in the world today. A greater engagement is needed with the manifold experiences and aspirations of mental health service users and others who self-identify as “religious” or “spiritual”.

There appears to be an implicit syncretistic assumption that all situated spiritualities benefit mental health. If they do, we shall only know this by conducting specific research on specific spiritualities. If we are to conduct research that engages with these loci of primary adherence, we need to read, listen and observe much more carefully before we begin.

Of course, it is not only theologians or clergy to whom we must listen. Ordinary people, from all religious traditions, do not necessarily believe the “orthodox” things that official teachings define, or the accepted academic consensus of the day, on matters of doctrine, belief or practice. However, theological and spiritual writings from the world’s major faith traditions do represent ways of exploring and understanding spirituality which most scientific research has hitherto not reflected. For an example of this, we might take Christian prayer.

Research on prayer in relation to mental health has typically relied on relatively simple questionnaire items which depend upon self report of frequency of prayer (Benda, 2002; Cook et al, 1997; Nooney et al, 2002). However, the definition of prayer is itself a complex issue and can end up sounding very similar to processes which we would normally consider to be psychological or psychotherapeutic, rather than spiritual or religious. For example it has been suggested that prayer is “primary speech... that primordial discourse in which we assert, however, clumsily or eloquently, our own being” (Ulanov et al, 1985) If prayer is, in fact, this fundamentally psychological, how do we distinguish it from psychotherapeutic processes? How do we know that people know when they are (or are not) doing it? How can we measure when it is being done well or badly?

Undoubtedly, some kind of transcendent reference might play a part in any distinction that might be made between what prayer is and isn’t, but herein we find another layer of complexity, for the nature of transcendence is also



debatable (Mackey, 2000; Rahner et al, 1983). More importantly, if theological definitions of prayer end up using psychological language it may prove very difficult to operationalise prayer as distinct from psychological processes, whereas if they end up using theological language, it may prove difficult to operationalise them at all, as God (however understood) is not an object amenable to scientific study. Nonetheless, prayer and psychotherapy can look very similar to each other (Cook, 2011), and therapeutic practices such as mindfulness (Mace, 2008), although non-theistic, straddle the boundary between the two.

While this line of thinking might lead us to pessimism about the feasibility of any scientific research on prayer, we do not think that nihilism is inevitable. Rather, it behoves us to be more explicit about what people are doing when they pray (Brümmer, 2008), and more sophisticated in our ability to identify different kinds of prayer. For example, it has proved possible to correlate personality with different kinds of prayer (Francis et al, 2008), which might in turn suggest ways in which research might give more attention to such relationships with mental disorder. Or, again, images of God (Francis et al, 2001; MacKenna, 2002) – rather than simply belief in (any kind of) God – might prove more discriminatory of positive and negative influences upon mental health.

In one area of prayer research, however, we wonder whether nihilism might be justified. So called “controlled trials” of intercessory prayer (Hodge, 2007)

generally not only fail to explore the wealth of literature addressing the nature and variety of prayer according to the world's major faith traditions but also fail to show any theological awareness of how the design of the study might in fact be fundamentally flawed. Is it possible or valid within Christian spirituality to ask God for healing of one person whilst simultaneously and implicitly asking that someone else should not be healed? Arguably it is not. If, then, prayer for any one person who suffers is offered only in the context that God is implored to have mercy on all who suffer, how can any difference between study groups possibly be expected? That such fundamental theological questions have typically not been addressed leaves this research looking very simplistic indeed.

## **Summary and Conclusions**

While much has been learned about the relationship between religion/spirituality and mental health this area of study remains in its infancy due to problems with measurement, consideration of cultural factors and context, and failure to truly integrate theological perspectives into study design and interpretation of results. We have pointed out areas that, given more attention, might promise significant advances and a better sense of direction in this rapidly growing field. Finally, it is important to point out that the research agenda is constrained by funding and there has been a lack of funding for qualitative research. **While the field of religion and mental health has grown considerably over the past decade, most of**

the research has been done without any funding support. Adequate sources of funding are essential for conducting high quality research in the future.

#### **Footnotes**

- 1. Simon Dein, Research Dept Mental Health Sciences, University College London, Uk**
- 2. Christopher Cook, University Durham , Durham , UK**
- 3. Harold Koenig Duke University, Durham NC , USA**

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